Polish government plans new attacks on the working class

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According to the European Commission, the Polish economy will grow by 2.5 percent in 2012, the highest rate of growth of any European Union member state. With unemployment and underemployment rising, the Civic Platform (PO) government of Donald Tusk is preparing renewed attacks on workers.

These attacks centre on plans for an imminent overhaul of the pension system. The retirement age is to be increased from 65 for men and 60 for women to 67 for everybody. Under current law, some jobs allow earlier retirement due to the onerous nature of the work. The new legislation will overturn all such regulations and increase the retirement age for some workers by more than 10 years.

The reason given for this massive assault is the aging of the Polish population. However, the main factor in slowing the flow of funds into the pension system is the mass exodus of young workers to western Europe due to an unemployment rate of more than 10 percent.

Slashing pensions will have a devastating social impact. Already, a majority of those over 55 are deprived of full-time employment. Only 36 percent of this population group have regular work.

In introducing the legislation, the Polish government is following guidelines laid down by the European Union (EU). The “Pact for Competitiveness” agreed on by euro zone countries in February 2011 called for the introduction of a retirement age of 67 years across Europe. Tusk plans to meet this requirement by 2015.

Earlier this year, the government’s health care “reform” took effect. It will lead to a massive deterioration of both health services and the conditions of health care workers. The law is forcing municipalities to privatise unprofitable hospitals. Staff will no longer be covered by public employment laws, permitting employers to lower wages and increase work hours.

In addition, many Poles can no longer afford their medications because the government has reduced or abolished subsidies for many drugs.

These attacks come under conditions in which the Polish economy is growing at a modest pace. Poland has doubled its volume of exports since 2000. Last year alone, exports rose by 10.5 percent compared to 2010. Although much of the goods exported (amounting to €140 billion) are unfinished products, mainly parts and supplies for western European and especially German industry, the growth levels are significant.

Polish workers have failed to benefit from this economic uptick. Instead, unemployment is rising, with a growing number of workers dependent on temporary or precarious jobs. In January, the official unemployment rate (which does not include all job-seekers) rose by 0.7 percent to 13.3 percent. According to Eurostat, 14.2 percent of the population lives below the poverty line. These figures are even more remarkable give the fact that some 2 million workers have left Poland in search of work in recent years and are not included in the statistics.

The brutal forms of poverty in Poland are indicated by the monthly statistics on those dying from the cold. In February of this year, police reported 72 fatal cases of frostbite, deaths that could have been prevented by simple measures. There were an additional 23 people who died from carbon monoxide poisoning resulting from defective heating systems.

At the same time, the wealth of the financial elite is growing rapidly. According to Eurostat, social inequality in Poland is well above the EU average. Credit Suisse's Global Wealth Report records 48,000 millionaires in Poland for the year 2011. A study by Deloitte LLP expects that this number will more than double by 2020.

The Polish situation makes clear that the attacks being carried out on the social rights of workers throughout Europe are not dictated simply by the state of the economy. Workers are being attacked even where there is economic growth. The attacks are part of a campaign by European and international capital to wipe out the social gains of workers in every country.

The case of Poland also makes clear the central role played by EU institutions in dismantling these social gains. Back in the 1990s, the EU demanded that the country enact numerous "structural reforms" as a condition for entry into the union, measures that caused widespread misery.

Now the same process is taking place with regard to accession to the euro zone. While the pension reform is linked to the Pact for Competitiveness, other cuts and privatisations are justified as necessary to comply with the stability criteria of the euro zone, according to which budget deficits must not exceed 3 percent of gross domestic product. Greece is the living proof that such "shock therapy" leads only to economic slump and the mass impoverishment of the working class.

As in Greece and other European countries, resistance is growing in Poland. Some 1.4 million Poles have signed protest petitions against the government's pension reform. In polls, the ruling Civic Platform party has fallen by nearly 9 points to just 28 percent within a month. Some 77 percent of respondents are dissatisfied with the government.

Poland has also witnessed large protests against ratification of the international Anti-Counterfeiting Trade Agreement (ACTA), which would cut off access to culture for millions of young people across the country.

Only recently, workers at PKP rail and TK Telekom threatened to strike during the European football championships if the government went ahead with plans for the privatisation of the state railways.

Popular resistance is held in check by the trade unions, which work closely with the government. They have systematically blocked workers' struggles. The country's main statistical office recently revealed that there were just 53 strikes in Poland in 2011, involving fewer than 19,000 workers.